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Walking in Their Shoes: Using Multiple-Perspectives Texts as a Bridge to Critical Literacy

Lane W. Clarke, Erin Whitney

By combining a critical literacy framework with multiple-perspectives texts, teachers can provide students with rich and meaningful literacy experiences that reach beyond the classroom walls.

A teacher looked at us with eager eyes as we presented this topic in classroom demonstration at a recent conference. She had heard over and over why critical literacy is important, why she needed to get her students to dig beyond the surface, and how they would be better readers and thinkers if she could inspire her students to interrogate texts from an analytical stance. But what had been lacking for this teacher, and many others of us, is the *how*. Although pure critical literacy defies a *how*, many teachers are desperate for their literacy instruction to make an impact on their students' lives but need an entry point to get them there. We believe that combining Jones's (2006) Frame for Thinking, Planning, and Enacting with books that highlight multiple perspectives allows teachers to create a bridge to powerful critical literacy learning in their classrooms. Multiple-perspectives texts are books that deliberately foreground different viewpoints. Table 1 provides a list of books that we have used in the classroom and how they can be used for this purpose; this is not an exhaustive list. Uses for several of these books as well as links to ReadWriteThink connections will be explained in detail in the remainder of this article (for example, see "Postmodern Picture Books in the Middle School," which focuses on Macaulay's *Black and White*, and "Teaching Voice With Anthony Browne's *Voices in the Park* at ReadWriteThink.org for

lessons that connect with two of the titles listed in Table 1).

What Is Critical Literacy?

The term *critical literacy* gets a lot of play in college classrooms, conferences, and in journals, but one of the frustrations that teachers have is that it is difficult to pin down a definition. Many states' standards require teachers to incorporate critical and deep thinking into their classrooms, so teachers turn to critical literacy—which they believe to be synonymous with critical thinking—but are left with little guidance from state standards. On one hand, the fact that critical literacy is left undefined is purposeful and is rooted in the work of Freire (1970), as he suggested that literacy should give people the tools of emancipation against their oppressors. It is this social justice approach to critical literacy that makes it antithetical to a prescriptive definition. However, this does not leave much room for teachers to capitalize on this type of thinking; therefore, others have taken a more text-based approach to critical literacy. For example, Comber (2001) wrote that "a critical analysis requires interrogating what texts tell us about the way things are and why" (p. 272). And Jones (2006) stated that "critical literacy is like a pair of eyeglasses that allows one to see beyond the familiar and comfortable: it is an understanding that language practices and texts are always informed by ideological beliefs and perspectives whether conscious or otherwise" (p. 65). Therefore, if we use Jones's analogy of the eyeglasses to see the socially situated world in which texts are created, how can we take these metaphorical glasses and use them in our classroom instruction?

Table 1
Sample List of Multiple-Perspectives Texts

Book	Publication information	Description
Chapter books		
<i>Bat 6</i>	Virginia Euwer Wolff 2000 New York: Scholastic.	This historical fiction text is set in post–World War II Oregon. This is a compelling story told by various members of an adolescent girls’ softball team—each having their own viewpoint on events that unfold when a Japanese American player joins the team.
<i>Seedfolks</i>	Paul Fleishman 1997 New York: HarperTrophy.	This book centers on an urban community garden. Each chapter is told from a different character about how the garden has impacted his or her life.
<i>Witness</i>	Karen Hesse 2001 New York: Scholastic.	Told both in narrative verse and from multiple perspectives, this powerful historical fiction text documents events that occur when the Ku Klux Klan comes to a small Vermont town in 1924.
<i>Flipped</i>	Wendelin Van Draanen 2001 New York: Knopf.	This is a typical “he said/she said” text told from the perspectives of two adolescents. Not only does the text flip back and forth between narrators but so too does the children’s perspectives on life and each other.
<i>Twice Upon a Time: Rapunzel: The One With All the Hair</i>	Wendy Mass 2005 New York: Scholastic.	This book takes a twist on the typical Rapunzel fairy tale but this time is told in alternating voices between the prince and Rapunzel herself.
<i>Never Mind: A Twin Novel</i>	Rachel Vail and Avi 2004 New York: Scholastic.	This realistic fiction text goes back and forth between the two perspectives of boy and girl twins dealing with typical adolescent issues of popularity, fitting in, and finding their own voices.
Picture books		
<i>Encounter</i>	Jane Yolen 1992 New York: Voyager Books.	This beautiful picture book tells the story of Columbus’s first encounter with the indigenous people who inhabited the new world. Told from the perspective of a Tainio Indian boy, this book demonstrates how many voices and perspectives have been left out of historical narratives.
<i>Seven Blind Mice</i>	Ed Young 1993 New York: Scholastic.	This book takes an old fable and reworks it as seven blind mice each try to figure out a creature. Each mouse feels a different part of the creature and comes to a different conclusion. It is not until a wise mouse puts all pieces together that the mice learn that the sum is larger than its parts.
<i>Black and White</i>	David Macaulay 1990 Boston: Houghton Mifflin.	Awarded the 1991 Caldecott Medal, this book seems like a collection of four separate stories; however, when viewed as a whole they create a fascinating account of different perspectives.
<i>I Am the Dog, I Am the Cat</i>	Donald Hall 1994 New York: Dial.	This story is told back and forth from a dog’s and a cat’s point of view. The two animals share their opinions on normal pet life, like eating, sleeping, and their families, and what it is like to be a dog and cat.
<i>George vs. George: The American Revolution as Seen From Both Sides</i>	Rosalyn Schanzer 2004 Washington, DC: National Geographic.	This book tells the story of the American Revolution from both sides—King George and George Washington. Through alternating perspectives, the author highlights that there are two sides to every story.
(continued)		

Table 1 (continued)
Sample List of Multiple-Perspectives Texts

Book	Publication information	Description
<i>Diary of a Spider,</i> <i>Diary of a Worm,</i> <i>Diary of a Fly</i>	Doreen Cronin 2003, 2005, 2007 New York: Joanna Cotler.	Taken as a trio, each of these books presents a diary from a different perspective. These wildly popular books will resonate with students as each character develops a unique voice.
<i>You Read to Me, I'll Read to You: Very Short Fairy Tales to Read Together</i>	Mary Ann Hoberman 2001 New York: Little, Brown.	This book, a part of the <i>You Read to Me</i> series, does a wonderful job of representing different perspectives in familiar fairy tales.
<i>Voices in the Park</i>	Anthony Browne 2001 New York: Dorling Kindersley.	This book tells the story of a simple park encounter from the perspective of four different characters. Each perspective has its own unique set of concerns and interpretation of this harmless play date at the park.

Jones’s Framework and Multiple Perspective Texts

In Jones’s (2006) book *Girls, Social Class, and Literacy*, she shares a framework that can begin the process of encouraging students to think critically about texts, themselves, and their worlds. This framework has three parts: *deconstruction*, *reconstruction*, and *social action*. She states that “all texts are embedded with multiple meanings and one way to examine some of those meanings is to peel away the layers through the consideration of perspective, positioning, and power” (p. 79). In this article we explore how we took Jones’s three tenets of critical literacy and combined them with texts that deliberately foreground multiple perspectives. We feel that multiple perspective texts can be used as a springboard for developing critical thinking and empowering literacy pedagogy.

Deconstruction

The first layer of interpretative work involves deconstructing issues of power, perspective, and positioning in a text (for more, see Jones, 2006). While literally *deconstruction* means to take things apart, what the students are doing at this stage is to pull back layers of meaning. The beauty of using multiple perspective texts is that students are overtly conscious of multiple voices and how things change when seeing an issue through a different vantage point. We have used

some very familiar reading strategies with different books to engage our students in deconstruction.

Readers Theatre

Readers Theatre is a wonderful way to get students to hear multiple perspectives in a text. For example, in *George vs. George: The American Revolution as Seen From Both Sides* by Rosalyn Schanzer the students can work in groups to create a script for both King George and George Washington. By probing different vantage points—especially the ones that are not heard from as often—students can see how power and perspective can silence one of the two sides in every story and influence how we interpret history. For younger students, *You Read to Me, I’ll Read to You: Very Short Fairy Tales to Read Together* by Mary Ann Hoberman, a book of read-alouds that showcase different points of view from familiar fairy tales, can also help students think about perspective.

Graphic Organizer

The use of graphic organizers is another way to investigate multiple perspectives in a text. A graphic organizer for a book like *I Am the Dog, I Am the Cat* by Donald Hall can highlight life from both a dog’s and a cat’s point of view. By representing this on a side-by-side chart, students can see perspective more clearly, which can lead to discussions about point of view (see “Charting Characters for a More Complete

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Understanding of a Story” at ReadWriteThink.org for a character perspective chart).

Visual Representation

Taking a picture of something familiar and breaking it down into unrecognizable pieces can also emphasize how important it is to see things from different sides. For example, one teacher took a picture of a lizard and cut it into pieces. Then she gave each student a piece and had them create a picture from that small part. For example, one student turned the head into a ghost, while another turned the tail into a Viking ship. The students were captivated when she took each individual piece and showed them the completed lizard. The book *Seven Blind Mice* by Ed Young can be used to further this activity, as it highlights how all of the individual pieces can be interpreted so differently apart from its whole (see “Teaching Point of View With Two Bad Ants” at ReadWriteThink.org for a lesson on visual perspective that could serve as a follow-up to *Seven Blind Mice*).

Making Connections and Disconnections

Making connections and disconnections with a text is another way for students to engage in pulling back the layers of power, perspective, and positioning. Making connections is a common comprehension strategy, but students are not always pushed to make disconnections with text—that is, how are texts different from your life, how do you not connect with the text, or what in this text could others have a disconnect with (Jones & Clarke, 2007). Critical literacy involves situating the self into a larger, socially constructed context, and therefore, asking students to draw themselves into these text worlds can be a vehicle for this type of thinking. In the book *Seedfolks* by Paul Fleishman, each chapter is narrated by a different character, all of whom have radically different backgrounds and perspectives. Having students connect (what was similar to their lives) and also disconnect (what was different) with the characters in this book can lead to powerful conversations about the similarities and differences that we have with others. For example, one student connected with the character Curtis when he stated that he knew what it was like to get frustrated when something you worked hard for did not work out (like when his tomatoes

started to disappear), but he disconnected with Curtis’s desire to get married and change his whole life for someone else (see “Guided Comprehension: Making Connections Using a Double-Entry Journal” at ReadWriteThink.org for a lesson on making connections and for a graphic organizer that can be adapted to emphasize disconnections).

Reconstruction

It is not enough just to deconstruct a text, but we also have to give the students an opportunity to use this knowledge to create new ways of thinking. As Jones (2006) stated, “reconstructing identities of people who have been marginalized and devalued over the course of time is crucial in the work of critical literacy” (p. 77). Through activities such as journaling, diary entries, and changing familiar stories, teachers can help students move from an understanding of these deconstructed “texts” to creating “new,” reconstructed texts.

Diary Entries

One powerful reconstruction activity is to write diary entries that juxtapose multiple viewpoints. For example, the students read a traditional account of Columbus’s landing in the new world (a point of view we tend to hear often). Then the students read the story *Encounter* by Jane Yolen, which retells this familiar narrative through a different perspective. After completing the readings, students wrote simultaneous diary entries of the first encounter through the eyes of Columbus and of a young Taino boy. One student wrote in her Columbus diary entry about the Taino tribe, “They look nice and strong so we can make a profit off of them,” and simultaneously wrote about the fears of the indigenous people, “These strangers have unusual habits, I hope that our chief does not welcome them.” This activity can create a wonderful entry point to discussions about marginalized peoples and perspectives and can begin to give voice to

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those who have not historically had one (see “Critical Perspectives: Reading and Writing About Slavery” at ReadWriteThink.org for a lesson on writing from different vantage points).

Rewriting Familiar Stories

Another successful writing activity is to re-create a favorite story and rewrite this from multiple viewpoints. For example, students can choose a story like Cinderella and rewrite it from the perspective of the mice, the stepsister, the prince, or the fairy godmother. Again, through writing students can take what they learned about power, positioning, and perspective in deconstruction and re-create a new story (see the interactive tool “Fractured Fairy Tales” at ReadWriteThink.org for ideas of how to rewrite familiar fairy tales from new perspectives).

Social Action

It is important that students see themselves in a larger world beyond the walls of the classroom. It is for this reason that the final step in a critical literacy exploration needs to be one that builds upon deconstruction and reconstruction to connect to larger social issues. It is clearly not enough to read different perspectives or write from different perspectives, but these activities can provide the building blocks that can be used to springboard into social awareness. Social action in the classroom can be both big and small, but taking these investigations outside of the classroom can leave a powerful impression on the students and their communities. By widening this exploration, students can have a better understanding of others, a greater appreciation of diversity, and an awareness of how to live in a globalized world. Some ideas that could become social action projects could be sharing new texts with others in the school, writing letters to magazines and newspapers asking for multiple perspectives to be represented, interviewing a variety of community members about a single issue, or creating a schoolwide campaign about seeing things

through multiple viewpoints. Getting students to see beyond their own lives is one of the difficult but most essential aspects of critical literacy. Multiple perspective books can help by structuring learning to move through the stages of deconstruction, reconstruction, and social action. Through these texts, students can consider how power and positioning impacts how different perspectives are listened to and represented, not just in these texts but in their lives as well (see “Crit Lit for Kids: From Critical Consciousness to Service Learning” at ReadWriteThink.org for an example of how to use powerful literacy learning as a tie-in to learning about social action and service).

“Thank You”

The teacher in our session felt grateful that we could provide a simple framework and some suggested texts to help her begin to explore critical literacy in her classroom. We certainly don’t believe that this is all that needs to be done in the name of critical literacy but suggest that through this pairing teachers can begin on a longer journey of providing rich and meaningful literacy experiences that will empower students and encourage deep thinking about texts, themselves, and the surrounding world.

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